

Title: Freshwater Lab Summit  
Date: May 10, 2017  
Time: 1:00 p.m. - 5:30 p.m.  
Location: UIC  
Documenter: Miriam Annenberg

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### **Who was at the meeting? (include titles and affiliations)**

The meeting was attended by government officials, academics, researchers, community leaders, community members, media members, and water activists. Attendees included:

- 1) Antonio Lopez, Associate, Freshwater Lab
- 2) Debra Taylor, Co-founder, We the People of Detroit
- 3) Yanna Lambrinidou, PhD, Department of Science and Technology in Society, Virginia Tech
- 4) Kim Wasserman-Nieto, Executive Director, Little Village Environmental Justice Organization
- 5) Robin Amer, Deputy Editor, Chicago Reader
- 6) Naomi Davis, President and Founder, Blacks in Green
- 7) Mayor Paula Hicks-Hudson, Toledo, Ohio
- 8) Mayor Marcus Muhammad, Benton Harbor, Michigan
- 9) Mayor John Dickert, Racine, Wisconsin
- 10) Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson, Gary, Indiana
- 11) Mayor Tom Barrett, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 12) Former Mayor Hilliard Hampton, Inkster, Michigan

### **What were three goals of the meeting?**

I attended two sessions, so I specified goals by session:

#### **Environmental Justice Plenary**

- 1) Recognize female community leaders, specifically females of color, working in front line organizations on water issues.
- 2) Discuss the importance of alignment between front line organizations, the media, academics, and government in addressing water issues in the Great Lakes regions.
- 3) Discuss environmental equity as it pertains to water in racial and economic contexts and work towards shifting the paradigm that gives government, academics, and media the power instead of those affected by the issues.

#### **Great Lakes Mayor's Panel**

- 1) Discuss how government leaders and bodies can work together on projects that benefit and protect water sources in the Great Lakes regions.
- 2) Discuss challenges facing cities in the Great Lakes region, specifically cities with large populations of people of color, in regard to water quality and sustainability.
- 3) Recognize leaders of color and women of color working to better the water sources in their communities.

### **What were the main concerns of attendees? Why?**

The main concerns of attendees were how to align all interested groups--community leaders, government officials, non-profit groups, residents, and the media--in working together to solve

water issues in the Great Lakes region. Solutions that one group tries to enact sometimes hit roadblocks when they come up against another group, and outsider groups don't always fully account for all of the needs of the community. Communication is key in creating this alignment.

Along those lines, one of the main concerns was either government or academic groups coming into communities impacted by water issues and taking action without ever discussing with residents what their needs are. Water shutoffs or emergency oversight become the norm without a single discussion with a resident or community representative. By looking at the issues from too broad of a vantage point, what residents actually need is sometimes overlooked.

A third concern was funding across all groups, a large concern given the limited funding funneled towards water issues. Academics are concerned about not doing the right research actually needed to help communities, thereby wasting funding. Media is concerned about a lack of funding that limits their ability to tell stories about Great Lakes water issues. Community organizations worry about funding granted to address narrow issues, without consulting the community on what the more pressing needs are. Government leaders lamented the funding being taken away from them on the state level that leaves them unable to solve their own water problems.

### **What were next steps and solutions discussed?**

There were not specific next steps or solutions discussed so much as offering broader encouragement to create alignment among all involved groups and directing them to work together on issues moving forward. There was a lot of discussion reminding leaders and media that as they work towards and report on solutions to not do so at the expense of front line groups and to keep environmental equity in mind. Outsider groups who want to help are great, but can't ignore the specific ecosystems and needs of those on the front line (for example Standing Rock, Flint, etc.)

Some mayors did offer suggestions for individual communities, such as investing in green infrastructure and taking into consideration runoff caused by factories or farms around you. Furthermore, they suggested when government and community leaders see ideas working in neighboring communities, they should steal these ideas and use them for themselves.

### **Who are key people to make change happen in this community/around this issue?**

The key people making change happen are those on the community level--community members and those working with front line organizations, such as the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. Water issues disproportionately affect communities of color, and community leaders need to take the lead, directing government and researchers in the information and support they need. If they see a potential solution, they need to start working towards it, regardless of if it seems immediately attainable.

### **Other Notes**

- Toxic relationships can exist between different stakeholders (academic researchers,

mainstream media, front line organizations), and it is a challenge to align in a meaningful way.

- Debra Taylor of We the People Detroit spoke specifically about the need to do things yourself when the government won't. She and her colleagues took it upon themselves to do policy work and research, mapping the water crisis in Detroit and the water shutoffs. Her group published a book detailing the issue.
- Taylor discussed the importance of people first, and that water is a human right.
- Scientist Yanna Lambrinidou spoke about the need for thinking very critically as researches and recognizing the power and authority attributed to them versus the much lesser power associated with the people actually affected by the issues. She said it's important to recognize that paradigm and work to empower those living with the issues each day.
- Kim Wasserman-Nieto of Little Village Environmental Justice Organization spoke about the importance of messaging. She discussed the media communities want versus the media they need and creating media that is of value to the community. She talked about the difficulty in finding the right message and deciding who speaks for the community.
- Wasserman-Nieto also lamented being used "as the polar bears" of environmental issues. She said people from communities of color are always pinpointed as those affected by environmental issues (similar to polar bears with climate change), but those pointing that out don't come into the communities and ask what they need or align with their values.
- There was discussion on making academics the authority and residents the victims in news stories, and the requirement of media to meet a burden of proof through expert consultation and staying balanced and factual, which often results in residents only consulted for their emotion and experience rather than expertise.
- There is a need for sharing of power between the "authority" and the residents in communities affected by water issues.
- The Great Lakes holds 20% of the fresh water in the world, and proxy wars for power over that water are to be expected.
- Populations are growing in regions without water, including deserts, which will make the Great Lakes resources more valuable.
- According to Mayor John Dickert of Racine, Wisconsin, the Great Lakes recharge at 1% each year, but if there is no freeze, they recede at 2 inches each year. So, if there is no freeze for 10 years, the lakes would be lowered by 20 inches--very significant. This would greatly affect drinking water, farming, economy, etc.
- Warmer temperatures have resulted in algae blooms, which result in more no swimming and no drinking days in the Great Lakes region, another challenge for local governments.
- Great Lakes cities are spending millions of dollars on upgrading water treatment plants.
- According to Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson, of Gary, Indiana, education is key in keeping water clean and safe, and leaders have to feel empowered to take action regardless of what the state or federal--or even local--government is doing. They often don't have clear plans of action.

- Water is at the center of many Great Lakes cities, from fishing, to recreation, to drinking water, to research, to technology, to education.
- Many Great Lakes cities in Michigan have federal oversight in place to oversee clean water issues, but Michigan continues to take away money from the cities that would help them solve the issues themselves in the first place.